

Janis Joplin's Lifetime: 'A Rush'

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Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File); Oct 7, 1970;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times (1881-1989)

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BY ROBERT HILBURN

Times Pop Music Critic

Janis Joplin was the biggest female star in the history of rock music. In her records and concerts, she gave more of herself—emotionally and physically—than anyone else dared.

On stage, her fiery, almost tortured performances would find her hair flying from side to side as she twisted her body, her feet stomping the stage as she struggled to get even more feeling from vocal cords that already seemed stretched unmercifully. But it was all a compulsion.

Janis Joplin needed love very badly. And she could only find it, apparently, from audiences.

To understand her, one has to understand the importance music played in her

life. It was the single most important force. It could make her rude, impatient, gentle, generous, irritable or exciting. But it was just a means. She was after the rewards that an audience's enthusiastic response gave her.

"I like working," she told me in a 1969 interview. "They used to book me only one night a week because I was making enough in one night to pay for everything. But it was a drag. I told them I wanted to play more. The most fun I have is when I'm playing.

"When we're not on stage, we rehearse, lie around in bed, check in and out of motels, watch television. The worst thing is the loneliness.

"Somehow you lose all the old friends. The travel circumstances pull them away. It is hard to make new ones.

"I live for that one hour on

stage. It is full of feeling. It's more excitement than you'd find in a lifetime. It's a rush, honey."

When she said that final phrase, her eyes brightened with the excitement of a little kid who has just received a new toy. She leaned forward, gave a kind of high giggle-laugh and said: "Use that, that line about 'It's a rush.' That's a dope term. My friends would get a kick out of seeing it in print."

We were in her dressing room at the Hollywood Bowl. She had been rehearsing for about an hour for a concert she was going to give that evening. She had ushered everyone else out of the dressing room trying it seemed, to find a refuge from the world that had put so much pressure on her.

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MISS JOPLIN'S LIFE

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When I called her Hollywood motel room earlier in the week to ask about an interview, I somehow expected, in keeping with the stereotype about rock music performers, to hear a lot of noise and activity on the other end of the phone. But she said hello in a very quiet, joyless voice. There was no emotion, little life in it.

She said the interview would be fine but it would have to be another day.

"I'm really down," she said. "I had a horrible day, man, and I'm just going to bed and try to forget it."

Her Complaint

Her complaint had something to do with a business matter that I don't remember now. She suggested I come to her Bowl rehearsal later in the week.

At the rehearsal, she seemed impatient about everything. She would stop in the middle of a song, turn and shout all sorts of complaints at the musicians. Often, over the course of her career, she would change backup bands. She always wanted just the right sound when she met her audience so that the response would be at the maximum.

In the dressing room that day, she seemed less concerned about the impression she was making than anyone I've met in rock. There was no weighing of words before she spoke. She sat on a sofa, smoking a cigaret and talked about her intense life—on stage and off—that led her to be called such phrases as the "Judy Garland of rock" to the "Hippie queen of show business."

Fragile Underneath

As on the phone, she was complaining about business matters. Though she was terribly tough on the surface, she seemed fragile beneath all those flashy rings, colorful clothes and long flowing

hair. There seemed to be a certain amount of fatalism in her manner. I mentioned it.

"People seem to have a high sense of drama about me," she replied. "Maybe they can enjoy my music more if they think I'm destroying myself."

"Sure, I could take better care of myself. I suppose I could eat nothing but organic foods, get eight hours of sleep every night, stop smoking. Things like that. Maybe it would add a couple of years to my life. But what the hell?"

"I got into this (singing) because of something inside me. I'm not one of those people with a learned skill. If I'm going to do it, I'm going to do it for real. I can't just get out on stage and fake it. I've got to let loose with what's inside."

Much of that feeling inside came from the sorrow and frustrations of childhood. She arrived in San Francisco in 1966, something of a mental and physical runaway from Port Arthur, Texas, where she recalled being something of an outcast.

Enjoyed Poetry

She said she enjoyed poetry and painting. People in Port Arthur, an oil refinery town on the Gulf of Mexico, felt there was something strange about that. "Man, those people hurt me," she said. "You know, it's hard when you're a kid to be different."

Moving to San Francisco, she joined Big Brother and the Holding Company, a Bay Area rock group she eventually left. Her first major appearance was at

the 1967 Monterey International Pop Festival, the event that was to bring stardom to her and, ironically, the late Jimi Hendrix and the late Otis Redding.

At her Bowl concert that night, it was easy to see, particularly after having talked with her, the joy she got from the audience. The first thing she did on stage was to remove the microphone from its stand and race to the front row of seats. She wanted to be as close as possible to the audience.

Then she went into one of her sensational, unpromising vocals. After a particularly effective number, she would cup her hands around the microphone, almost joining in the audience applause.

She was so different from the person I had met earlier. She was so happy for the warmth that the applause brought her. I'm sorry that she won't ever hear it again.

Newton Changes Date

Wayne Newton, who was to have opened Tuesday night at the Now Grove, will begin his engagement Thursday night. He has been ill with the flu.